

A LOOK AT 1 TIMOTHY 2:12

What Does Authority Have to Do with a Woman Minister?

by Sharon Ann Rhonemus

We are living in an age where the *Fascinating Woman* competes with the *Female Eunuch*; the aura of the *Total Woman* challenges the *Feminine Mystic* for the right to guide women in discovering their true roles in society. Erupting from the eye of this whirlpool of controversy of roles is a species of woman who feels the call to full-time ministry in a pastorate or another area, where until now, God has seemed to limit His calling to men. She is caught and pulled in both directions. Does she submit to the powers which are now over her (i.e. masculine hierarchy of her church) and satisfy her need by teaching a weekly Sunday school class, or does she establish herself as a responsible, caring leader and strive to attain to her own calling from God?

The writings of the apostle Paul serve only to intensify her struggle. On the one hand she sees how he respects Priscilla as well as her husband, Aquila, as a teacher of the full Gospel of Christ to the young, eloquent Alexandrian preacher, Apollos (Acts 18:24-26; cf. Rom. 16:3, 1 Cor. 16:19, etc.); on the other hand she reads his saying in I Timothy 2:12: "I permit no woman to teach . . . men" In action she sees Paul sending official documents of introduction for his Christian helper, Phoebe, whose leadership in her local congregation is portrayed by his use of the same word, *diakonos*, translated as "deacon" and "minister" in 18 of 23 appearances in the KJV. In his letter to Timothy, Paul writes, "I permit no woman . . . to have authority over men; she is to keep silent" (I Tim. 2:12).

We umbrella Paul's theology concerning the place of woman in the Christian church under Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,

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there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This is definitely his most mature statement on the subject of the Christian congregational life. But this question of authority and the woman pastor remains at the center of a called woman's struggle to fulfill her calling in a relatively new field. Growth is an outcome of struggle.

What can we do with I Timothy 2:11-15? Some scholars discount it as a non-Pauline epistle.¹ If that were fact, which I believe the majority of evidence points against, the passage is still part of the canon and must be considered. The other option seems to be to look at this passage in its historical and Biblical context and see if there is an eternal principle to be found here. From this passage in I Timothy, what does Paul say about the authority of a woman in the church?

A Woman as a Person?

The question seems strange to us. We live in a time when woman is discovering that she does have a heritage and that indeed she is a human being of worth. The Christian woman in the time of Paul came from a more oppressive background.

In his commentary on the *Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, William Barclay has made this observation about the Christian Woman:

Christianity emancipated women. It liberated them from what was really a kind of slavery. But there were dangers. She who was liberated might misuse her new found freedom; the respectable world might be shocked by such emancipation; and so the Church had wisely to lay down its regulations. It was by wisely using freedom, and not by misusing it, that women came to hold the proud position in the Church which they hold today.²

Paul's concept of womanhood was influenced by his Jewish background. He grew up in a culture in which his mother could only go a limited distance inside the court for sacrifices. When he assumed an active role as a member in constituting the quorum for a synagogue, she could only watch the service from behind a screen and was offered only theoretical participation in the reading of the Torah. Otherwise, her presence was not counted.

The Jewish woman was regarded as inferior to man, based primarily on the rabbinic interpretation of the Genesis account of the Fall found in Genesis three. Paul refers to this same passage in his reasoning for not

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permitting woman teachers in the church (I Tim. 2:9ff). To the Jew the woman stood on about the same level as the slave, having a similar type of religious obligation.

The woman was only given rights of equality with her husband through motherhood. W. O. E. Oesterly holds:

Woman is thought of and spoken of almost wholly from the point of view of man. Marriage is for man's benefit, not the woman's; she is useful to him, she looks after the household, ministers to his comfort, bears children; all for the man; the woman is not considered; she can be divorced, but she cannot divorce her husband; he can have a couple of wives or more, and concubines if he can afford to keep them all; she may only have one husband.³

The role of the woman within the family structure of the Hebrew culture was at a somewhat higher level than this statement allows. Love and dedication between husband and wife was on a higher level than in the surrounding pagan cultures. Children were taught to respect both mother and father. The Hebrew concept of familial love touched the spiritual realm as well as the physical relationship.

As Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, he was well aware of the kind of situation in which Timothy found himself as he pastored the congregation in Ephesus. This area was predominantly Greek and its attitudes added still other dimensions to the woman's role in the new Christian church.

Woman in the Hellenistic culture was also regarded as inferior, having a little more status than a slave. She was guarded in her chamber and kept away from other men. Marriage was not taken as seriously in the Greek culture as it was among the Hebrews. In the various religious temples, it was not unusual to have women priestess-prostitutes. Here, although there was a lofty concept of woman in the spiritual sense and physical sense, the day-to-day expressions of this ideal of womanhood did not really exist.

Common among the Greek women also was the elaborate dress about which Paul warns in verses 9-10 in the second chapter of the first letter to Timothy. In order to preserve dignity of womanhood while cautiously allowing women to express their new found freedom, the apostle Paul set down some very structured guidelines while not proclaiming them to be eternal truths. It is our task to search for those truths which cross the time barriers between then and now.

A Woman in Authority?

As we observe the immediate context in which this verse is found and the words and their relationship within the verse, I believe there are new insights into this question of authority and woman's right to express it in her own way in the church for its building up as a solid, supportive community.

Paul is speaking throughout his first letter to Timothy, and especially in chapter two to decorum as it is found in worship. In the two other passages where Paul deals with the role of women within the community of the church (I Cor. 11:2ff; 14:33-36), rules are being set down for the worship service. As Paul says in I Corinthians 14:33a: "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace." Women are entreated to keep silence within the church in I Corinthians 14:34 and in I Timothy 2:12 in order to preserve the dignity and orderliness of the worship authority. Women were not used to having such active participation in the worship service, so Paul encouraged (actually commanded) them to learn in silence (I Tim. 2:12) so as not to add confusion to the corporate worship.

In I Timothy 2:12, Paul combines two functions which occur in the organization of the congregation and prohibits their participation to women. The Greek text reads, "διδάσκειν δὲ γυναῖκι οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω, οὐδὲ ἀθροιστῶν ἀνδρός,"; that is, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men" When explaining the gifts given by the Holy Spirit for the up-building of the church (Eph. 4:11ff) there is no mention that the gifts are distributed to Christians according to their sex. Yet, the gift of teaching (Rom. 12:7; Eph. 4:11) in Paul's letter is limited for women to that kind of teaching which does not include having authority over men in the congregation. Is this a universal principle to be applied to the continuing church set down by Paul, or is it meant for the personal frame of reference in which it is given; that is, "*I permit* no woman"?

Taking a close look at the actual word for the concept, "to have authority over," we find that it is the word, ἀθροιστῶν, one of the several *hapax legomena* of the Pastoral Epistles. Why Paul pinpoints this exact wording may become clearer by studying its derivation.

The noun ἀθροιστῶν originally meant a suicide, murderer, a family-murderer; and is found in works of the Greek classic writers as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Herodotus, Euripides, and Thucydides. Later the term came to mean "lord," "master," "autocrat." Especially in koine Greek,

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the meaning of murderer disappeared, and that of "lord" became more prominent.

Other investigations have revealed that the word stems from slang. The Atticist Thomas Magister admonishes his pupils to use *αὐτοδικεῖν* and not *αὐθεντεῖν*, because the last word is vulgar slang. *Αὐτοδικεῖν* means "to judge by one's own standards," "to act on one's own authority," and thus "to decide." If a person would make a self-authorized move against himself, he would be taking his life into his own hands. If someone makes a self-authorized move against another person, he is being dictatorial.⁴

In the family experiencing *αὐθεντεῖν* by the wife, there would probably be a hen-pecked husband bossed by a domineering wife. In the church if this relationship exists, there would be an upset to the balance of men and women who otherwise would be giving to the whole congregation the uniqueness of themselves, both sexually and individually, and experiencing development into fuller persons.

Why did the apostle Paul not use the more common word expressing the use of authority, that is *ἐξουσιάζω*, or its noun form *ἐξουσία*? Maybe the irony of using a common-folk slang term has something to do with Paul's selection of *αὐθεντεῖν*, but there seems to be something inherent in the word *ἐξουσία* as used by Paul, which carries almost an opposite meaning to the precise word he used in I Timothy 2:12.

Concerning the Christian community, the New Testament concept of *ἐξουσία* is grounded in an authority which has the power of decision active in a legally ordered whole. This authority is not objective, on an abstract plane, not involved with what or who it has power to control. Rather it is a creative power which is actively involved in the sphere of its creation and with people.⁵

The basic example of *ἐξουσία* is God and His creative authority which is from the beginning of Creation. Paul shows us in Romans 9:21:

Has the potter no right over (*ἐξουσίαν*) the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?

More particularly this *ἐξουσία* means the freedom given to the Christian community by which its members can willingly submit to each other in love.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is the best example of this responsible form of authority. Paul sets himself as an example of a man who has rights (*ἐξουσίαν*) given to him by God and who will willingly

forego these “rights” for the furtherance of the Gospel (I Cor. 9:4ff). The verb form ἐξουσιάζω is used in I Corinthians 7:4 when speaking about the relationship between a husband and wife, neither ruling over his or her own body, but willingly giving it to the spouse. In the controversy concerning the Christians who wanted to eat the meat of idols, Paul uses the plea for them not to misuse God’s given liberty (ἡ ἐξουσία) if it would make a weaker brother stumble in his faith (I Cor. 8:9).

If we look to Paul’s teachings about the Christian’s response to earthly authorities — usually interpreted national governments — we even more willingly see his submission to further the Gospel. In Romans 13:1ff Paul admonishes “. . . Every person (to) be subject to the governing authorities (ἐξουσίαις). For there is no authority (ἐξουσία) except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” In Titus 3:1, Paul entreats his minister Titus to remind his congregation “to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work.”

Paul does not hesitate to use his own God-instituted authority of office in the building up of his congregations. In two passages of his second letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of the authority which the Lord has given to him to be used “for building up and not for tearing down” the body of believers (II Cor. 13:10; 10:8).

Ἐξουσία is in contrast with ἀθροεῖν because the authority of ἐξουσία is an authority which allows for the freedom of give-and-take in a relationship, whereas ἀθροεῖν represents an absolute dictatorship over another which is in fact antithetical to the Christian faith. Ἐξουσία is the proper relationship for mutual growth between husband and wife. Ἀθροεῖν is the destructive assertion of power which destroys the creation God has reinstituted. Paul bases his reasoning for woman’s submission and silence in the church on Eve’s being second to Adam in creation and the one who caused the other to sin (I Tim. 2:13-14). Eve’s self-authorized act brought the penalty of sin upon humankind. But with the new creation there is an attempt to bring both sexes back into a balanced relationship, mutual in its character. Christ is the supreme authority of the church. Man and woman must re-learn to base their relationships to each other and to Christ by learning the implications of obedience to His will through submitting to one another.

A Woman as Pastor?

Can a woman use her gift of “teaching and pastoring” in a church and still have a ministry which is Biblically based? In an article in the

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Journal of Psychology and Theology, George W. Knight III sets up his thesis in this way:

In considering the ministry of men and women in the church, three biblical truths must be held in correlation: (1) Men and women are equal as image bearers and, therefore, in their standing in and before Christ male and female are equal (Gal. 2:28); (a) men and women manifest in their sexuality a difference created and ordered by God — women by God's creative order are to be in subjection to men in the home and church, and are therefore excluded from the ruling and teaching offices; and (b) women have a unique function to fulfill in the diaconal task of the church, along with men, and in teaching situations in relation to women and children.⁶

Although this writer disagrees with most of the thesis, there is something to be said about his contention that there are unique differences between male and female set up from Creation which must be used differently and in their own context of leadership. This would be an authority used for the building up of the church.

From our study, I find it legitimate to assume that some of Paul's teachings concerning woman's role in the church were in fact contemporary and made temporarily to his time in order to ease the transition of woman's position within the church. Several women even during Paul's time were already assuming capable roles of leadership within their particular congregation.

The concept of authority remains the same even today. A woman (no more than a man) has no right to be the "boss" of a church. Instead, each congregation must develop in itself a mutual support system based on the use of the gifts and uniqueness of each of its members. Developing this mutual support system would probably be more in the woman's realm of ability and authority because it would seem to be inherent in the upbringing to which she is accustomed.

In my congregation we had a woman who had a gift in leading music. In my own desire to have more men at the pulpit, I was hedging in appointing her to this position. It was the men of my church who brought to my attention that if a woman had the gift for leading singing when they could not carry a tune in a bucket, the woman should be allowed to use that gift for the building up of the church. I realized their point and concurred with their selection. That night a church which normally has no singers on Sunday morning saw five, including two

men who sang around the piano for an hour and a half after their meeting was over. In supporting the woman, the singing has improved on Sunday morning.

Gifts are given to be used to build up the church. The gift of teaching and pastoring "for the equipment of the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith . . ." is not sexually bound.

Through honest submission of one Christian to another in the various stages of relationships, the kingdom of God comes to its fullness on earth. We are unique in our faith, not because of our hierarchies, but because we are the expressions of God's love to all men and women. Jesus Christ Himself said, "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (Jn. 13:35).

FOOTNOTES

¹Barbara Hall, "Paul and Women," *Theology Today* 31 (April, 1974), 50-55.

²William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 100-101.

³Joseph W. Gaspar, *Social Ideas in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947), p. 51.

⁴N. M. Hommes, "Let Women Be Silent in Church," *Calvin Theological Journal* 4, 1 (April, 1969), pp. 18-19.

⁵Werner, Foerster, "ἐξουσία," in Gerard Kittels *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, II (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), p. 566ff.

⁶George W. Knight III, "The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Male and Female with Special Reference to the Teaching/Ruling Functions in the Church," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 3 (Summer, 1975), p. 216.